

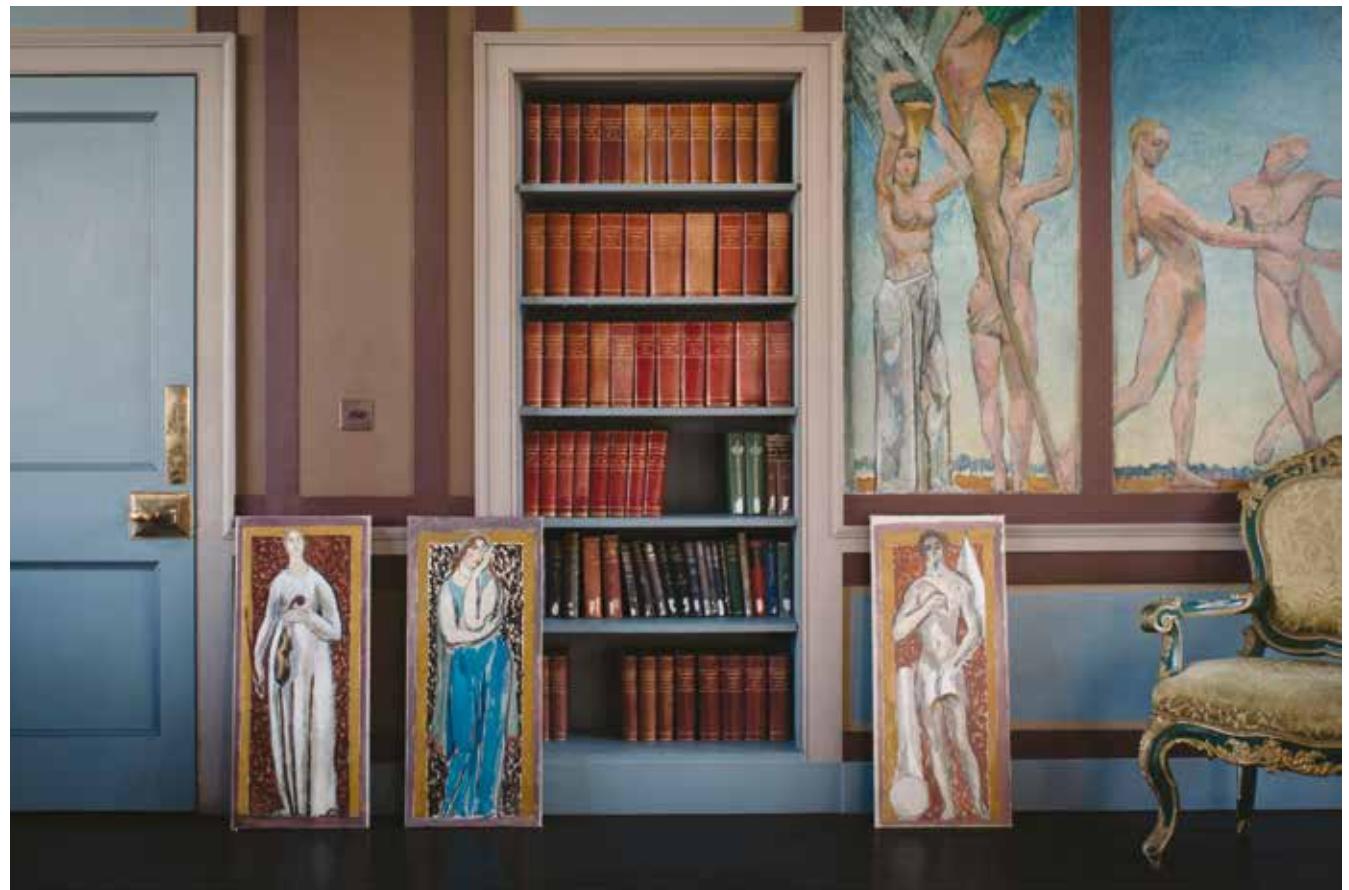


Opposite: one of the oil studies for Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell's 1920s panel paintings, 'The Muses of the Arts and Sciences', rests on a mantelpiece in Keynes's room at King's College. The finished works show the male figures completely nude, but the studies preserve their modesty. Below: another study for a muse - perhaps Poetry - is seen below Grant's original 1910 mural, *Dancers and Grape Pickers*. The chairs were imported from Rome - Keynes declared this financially expedient - to match Grant and Bell's paintings



# THE BLOOMSBURY SET

After John Maynard Keynes was made a fellow of King's College, Cambridge, in 1909, he enlisted the help of his then lover, Duncan Grant, in decorating his set, or suite of rooms. The painter's Matisse-style mural stayed on view until the economist acquired neighbouring rooms in 1920 - at which point Vanessa Bell joined Grant in executing a new scheme influenced by Renaissance frescoes. As the preparatory studies of their 'Muses' go on sale, Robert Hawkins reveals imagery and stories long hidden. Photography: Antony Crolla



This page, clockwise from top: the small oil studies' ochre borders borrow from Andrea del Castagno's *Cycle of Famous Men and Women*. The bookcase was once the door to Keynes's set, before the knocking-through of the rooms; the wall colours, chosen by Grant and Bell, have been recently refreshed; this hasty sketch on the back of an envelope, presumably by Grant, remained in Keynes's desk drawer until his death

This page, clockwise from top: the eight finished 'Muses' have been recently restored. They now adorn the college's one-time audit room; a spread in British *Vogue* in March 1925 celebrated the scheme; the sliver of burgundy surround in the studies shows the artists considering the framing that the panelling would provide. The set is still used for economics seminars

## FROM THE MOMENT

of his election as a fellow of King's College, Cambridge, in 1909, the economist and aesthete John Maynard Keynes set about making improvements to his college rooms. Writing to the artist Duncan Grant, his lover at the time, he remarked upon the 'splendour and acreage' of another fellow's rooms and wondered how they might together contrive a plan to rival them. In fact, Grant would go on to carry out two separate schemes of decoration over the decade that followed. He created the second of them, a series of eight stately figures in oil on canvas representing the muses of the arts and sciences, in collaboration with Vanessa Bell. In so doing the artist totally obscured his own first scheme (a mural, *Dancers and Grape Pickers*, painted in situ directly onto the wooden panelling of Keynes's sitting room) – until 2013. Now, however, not only has the college chosen to expose Grant's original mural, but a series of preparatory oil studies for the second scheme, privately owned, have paid a visit to Keynes's quarters to be photographed for the first time in the room for which they were painted.

The holiday that Grant and Keynes spent together in Greece in 1910 probably provided a good deal of inspiration for the Arcadian harvest imagery of the first mural and for the lithe, tensile bodies of its ring of dancers. Grant also visited France around this time, and perhaps saw Matisse's *La Danse*, but his taut, muscular figures are in an entirely different mode to those by the French master. Reams of Grant's sketches survive in the college's archive, offering fascinating glimpses of work in progress: from hasty studies drawn from life, perhaps made in Greece, to the more angular final figures. The resulting mural shows the melting-pot of Grant's influences in these exuberant early years, when he combined interest in Post-Impressionism with enthusiasm for great painters of the quattrocento, such as Piero della Francesca ('I have immense admiration for his frescos,' wrote Grant) and Alesso Baldovinetti (whose 'dotting' technique resembles what Vanessa Bell called Grant's 'leopard manner').

The 'primitivistic' touches, perhaps inspired by Picasso, did not please all viewers, though: according to Keynes, his bedder (the term for a Cambridge college housekeeper) apparently remarked that 'he much admired the lady in the second panel, but didn't approve of the lady in the third. "Speaking as a married man, sir, I don't like the idea of that woman's figure – looks like some sort of Zulu." Grant, too, had his reservations: he remembered throwing down his brushes in tears of frustration. At the insistence of Mark Lancaster, painter in residence at King's from 1968 to 1970, the mural was uncovered for the first time in half a century in the late 1960s and the elderly Duncan Grant, presented with his youthful decorations on a visit to the college, remained dissatisfied.

But by 1911 it seems Keynes had at least something of the 'splendour' he had craved: he paid Grant for the pictures and regarded them as finished. And in the ten years that followed Keynes managed to achieve the 'acreage', too: his rooms were amalgamated with those neighbouring, doubling the size of the sitting room and, crucially, the available wall space. Grant's original mural

must suddenly have seemed somehow truncated and unfinished. By 1920 Keynes was a prominent public figure following the success of his book *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. A fresh decorative scheme, which would make the newly enlarged rooms presentable, must have seemed a necessity.

Another holiday provided inspiration. Vanessa Bell accompanied Grant and Keynes to Italy in March 1920, where the trio saw work by Giotto, Cimabue and Piero della Francesca. Andrea del Castagno's frescoed *Cycle of Famous Men and Women*, at that time installed in the old convent of Sant'Apollonia in Florence, seemed to Bell to be 'more wonderful than ever' and probably shaped their design. The preparatory oil studies, seen here alongside the final pictures for the first time, betray Castagno's influence: their backgrounds are marbled alternately red and black – a detail present in Castagno's fresco but absent in the final paintings.

The painting of the full-sized panels began in August of that year, in an old army hut in the gardens at Charleston (Wol Dec 2013) that had 'eight divisions all along one side that just take the panels', thus offering 'the perfect place to do them in'. Bell hoped to have them finished that summer, and so painted 'rather quickly and directly': but in fact the work dragged on until 1922. At '5½ x 2½ ft each,' she noted, 'they are rather an undertaking.' Grant and Bell worked together on the new canvases and, as in many of their collaborations of this period, it remains impossible to discern their individual hands. This homogeneity worried Bell: 'Tell me what you really think about this question of Duncan's and my work being so alike,' she wrote to Roger Fry. 'The question is whether we really do have a bad effect on each other.' She also wondered whether, by prioritising the 'solidity of objects and space', she and Grant might have lost the 'great deal of excitement about colour'

that is so evident in Grant's earlier mural, and something of which survives in the oil studies, with their cadmium-red marbling. Grant simply worried that the new panels seemed 'dull'.

Nonetheless, 1922 saw the completion of the paintings and the carrying-through of the holistic approach to interior design fostered in the years of the Omega Workshops. As well as providing the canvases Grant and Bell specified the colour scheme for the entire room – dusty teal and burgundy – and supplied appliquéd curtains. Second-hand furniture bought on their Italian holiday completed the ensemble. According to Virginia Woolf, the finished composition created 'the pleasantest sitting room [she had] ever been in, owing to the colours and paintings, curtains and decorations'. *Vogue* even lavished a double-page spread on the scheme in 1925: 'By combining exact scholarship with an interest in contemporary art,' it announced, 'Mr Keynes has restored a tradition that has been lost to our universities since the Renaissance' ■

*Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell's studies for 'The Muses of the Arts and Sciences' will be presented by Philip Mould & Co at Masterpiece London, 29 June-5 July (020 7499 7470; masterpiecefair.com). The full findings of the author's recent archival research on the two decoration schemes are currently being prepared for publication*

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Opposite: one of the studies (not taken further) depicts a figure with a globe. This page, clockwise from top: after the removal of the 1920s 'Muses', half the panels in Keynes's set were painted to match the original dusty blue; Duncan Grant was photographed with his 1910 mural when it was briefly exposed in the late 1960s; the room now exhibits a compromise between the two schemes. Grant's muscular figures in a Bacchic round sit happily amid the later coloured panels